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Elliott, J. H.
Correspondence



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H. W. Duncanson

CORRESPONDENCE

Commodore Elliott

IN RELATION TO THE

Feb. 6th 1845

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CAPTURE OF THE BRITISH BRIGS

DETROIT AND CALEDONIA,

ON THE NIGHT OF OCTOBER 8, 1812.

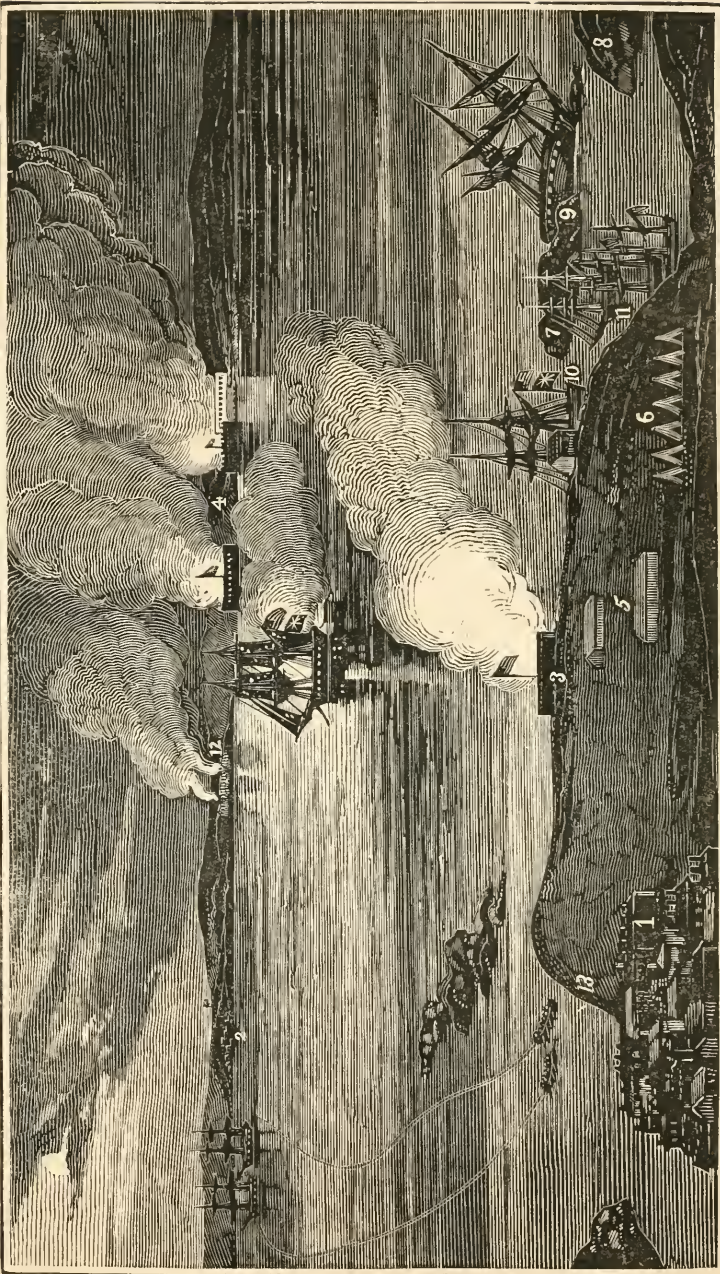
NOW FIRST PUBLISHED.

PHILADELPHIA:

UNITED STATES BOOK AND JOB PRINTING OFFICE, LEDGER BUILDING.

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1843.



Capture of the British Brigades DETROIT and CALEDONIA, by Lieut. J. D. ELLIOTT, U. S. N., on the Night of the 8th October, 1812.

No. 1, Buffalo—2, Fort Erie—3, Black Rock—4, British Batteries—5, Sailors' Barracks—6, Artillery Cantonment—7, Squaw Island—8, Strawberry Island—9, Detroit aground—10, Caledonia ashore—11, Navy Yard—12, British Artillery—13, Point of Embarkation.

E 544, 1843, Tuesday,

CORRESPONDENCE

IN RELATION TO THE

CAPTURE OF THE BRITISH BRIGS

1843

DETROIT AND CALEDONIA,

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PREFATORY REMARKS.

The following correspondence never having been laid fully and connectedly before the public, and the whole matter having been of late brought into renewed controversy by recent public discussions, I have thought it desirable that the affair should be clearly and definitively understood. No new ground has been taken, nor is any new hostility toward, or fresh imputation upon any person intended by the present publication: the sole object of which is purely explanatory. It furnishes both the text and the commentary.

J. D. ELLIOTT.

West Chester, May 6th, 1843.

CORRESPONDENCE.

WASHINGTON CITY, JULY 6, 1835.

To Commodore J. D. Elliott :

Sir—My attention was called to the enclosed article, which had been cut out of the Boston Courier and sent to a friend of mine in this place, with a request that he would obtain from me a statement of the services performed by the artillery under my command, in the capture of the brigs Detroit and Caledonia, and of the circumstances under which the latter was saved from being burnt to prevent recapture. I understood the information was wanted for publication, to correct what was believed to be erroneous in the article that appeared in the Courier, and to claim for the army whatever credit it was entitled to for that affair. On reflection, I thought that if such publication was made, it should be done by me, and under my name; and on further consideration, I concluded to make it; but before my statement was prepared, I noticed several paragraphs in the public prints relating to you, altogether of an unfriendly character; and I thought that a publication, at that time, contradicting the article in the Courier, which was intended to do you honor, would have the appearance of taking an unfair advantage of the feeling produced by these paragraphs. This, together with the important fact that you were then absent from the country, determined me to postpone it. Your return to the United States moves the objection soon than I anticipated. It occurs to me, however, that it will be most agreeable to you to make the corrections yourself, and to give my command the credit to which it is entitled. The object of this communication is, therefore, to ascertain from you which course you would prefer.

Your official report, dated October 9th, 1812, the day on which the capture was made, gives but an imperfect account of the boarding of the Caledonia, and says nothing about the subsequent preservation of that vessel under circumstances similar to those which induced you to cause the Detroit to be burnt. Your report says :

“ By 4 o'clock in the afternoon, I had my men in two boats, which I had previously prepared for the purpose. With these boats, fifty men in each, and under circumstances very disadvantageous; my men having scarcely had time to refresh themselves after a fatiguing march of five hundred miles, I put off from the mouth of Buffalo Creek at 1 o'clock the following morning, and at 3 o'clock I was alongside the vessels. In the space of ten minutes I had the prisoners secured, the topsails sheeted home and the vessels underway.”

From this, as well as from the statement in the Courier, it would appear that the vessels must have been anchored close together; that they were boarded at the same time under your superintendence and immediate orders, and that the part performed by the volunteers from the army, was not sufficiently important to be particularly noticed. Whereas, you will recollect that the night was dark, and that the boats separated immediately after leaving Buffalo Creek, and did

not see nor communicate with each other after that time; and you will also recollect that the *Caledonia* lay nearest the Fort, and to approach her, the boat commanded by Mr. Watts must pass the Detroit. As we passed, we were hailed and questioned, but not otherwise interrupted. At this time we indistinctly saw the *Caledonia*, and Mr. Watts expressed strong doubts about our being able to reach her on account of the current, and censured the pilot for having brought the boat nearer in shore. The pilot insisted on the practicability of reaching the brig, notwithstanding the current and the time lost in hesitating about making the attempt. It then became necessary, to prevent an abandonment of the enterprize, so far as we were concerned, that I should take the responsibility and command. We reached the brig with difficulty, and under disadvantageous circumstances. After a sharp conflict, we succeeded in carrying her with a loss, on our part, of two killed and thirteen wounded. Your official report mentions but one killed and four wounded; but that was confined to seamen. You had no return of my command, which consisted of twenty nine artillerists; of whom one was killed and nine wounded; making the aggregate as stated.

After mentioning the circumstances which compelled you to anchor the Detroit under the fire of the enemy, and the impracticability of getting her into harbor, you give the particulars of your landing and of the enemy's boarding with forty soldiers, and then being compelled to leave her "with the loss of nearly all his men;" but you do not mention burning the brig to prevent subsequent recapture.

In speaking of the other vessel, you say, "The *Caledonia* had been beached in as safe a position as the circumstances would admit of, under one of our batteries at Black Rock." There was no selection of place in "beaching" the *Caledonia*; she grounded in the Niagara river, opposite two of the enemy's batteries, which kept up a fire on her at intervals throughout the day. About the time you left the Detroit, Mr. Watts left the *Caledonia*, with the prisoners taken in her, and did not return. I remained on board with my command, and notwithstanding the fire of the enemy, succeeded in getting the brig afloat by landing part of her cargo. If Mr. Watts, or the seamen, had remained or returned after the cargo was landed, we should have been able to have brought the vessel into port; but for want of nautical skill, I could only succeed in bringing her nearer the shore, and into a safer position, before she again got aground.

About dusk a seaman came on board with combustibles, and stated that you had sent him with instructions to burn the brig; that you were informed the enemy had crossed the river below, and was marching to attack Black Rock; that the troops were leaving the Rock to join the main body, under General Smyth; and that unless the brigs were burnt, they would be recaptured. At this time the Detroit was on fire. As I did not believe the enemy intended to attack, and that if he did, it would be soon enough to burn the brig when it was found he could not be repulsed, I would not permit your order to be executed. The report of the enemy's movements proved to be incorrect, and the *Caledonia* was saved.

You will probably ask why, if your official report was considered incorrect, or not sufficiently particular in its details, it was not mentioned to you at the time, and why it has been permitted to remain thus long without explanation or correction? The answer, so far as I am concerned, is that the day following the date of your report, Mr. Watts called on me, as he said, by your direction,

to request me to furnish you my statement, which you wished to have before you sent your report to Washington. I replied that I was bound to report to my superior officer, then Lieut. Col. Scott, and that I could not communicate officially with you on the subject without disrespect to him. Having thus declined to furnish you my statement of the facts, I had no right to complain of the omissions in your report; as you could have had no personal knowledge of some of the most important circumstances connected with the capture of the Caledonia.

I have been frequently advised to make a statement of the circumstances in the journals of the day; but it appeared to be a small matter, not sufficiently important to interest the public, and so far as relates to ourselves, that view was probably correct; but as attention has recently been called to the subject by the article in the *Courier*, I can no longer remain silent, without neglecting a duty I owe to those who acted with me. I feel the obligation more forcibly since the death of the lamented and gallant Captain Schenck, the only officer who shared with me the duty of making the statement and the responsibility of delaying it.

You are unquestionably entitled to all the credit due for planning the enterprise, and for commanding, in person, the party that boarded the Detroit; but, in every thing relating to the Caledonia, the brig first captured, you had no other agency than that of suggesting the plan and furnishing the boat and seamen that boarded her. Although but a merchant vessel, she made a gallant and desperate resistance, and it was not until we had two men killed and thirteen wounded, (two mortally,) that she was captured, while the Detroit permitted you to get alongside before you were discovered, and to board her almost without resistance.

I have always thought it strange that the Detroit, a British vessel of war laying near an enemy, should have been captured by surprise, more especially as she must have known, from the firing of the Caledonia, the hostile character of the boat she had just hailed. It was certainly fortunate for us that the person in command was a *provincial*, and not a regular officer of the British Navy, as I had, until lately, believed.

As to the preservation of the Caledonia after capture, you will recollect that she, as well as the Detroit, was exposed through the day to the enemy's fire; that about the time you quitted the latter, and the British got temporary possession of her, Mr. Watts left the former, taking with him the seamen and prisoners, while my detachment remained on board, landed part of the cargo and got the brig near in shore. You will also recollect you determined the Caledonia should be burnt as well as the Detroit, to prevent recapture; but that the person you sent was not permitted to execute your order, and that the brig thus saved formed part of that gallant fleet that achieved the glorious and important victory on Lake Erie.

You will oblige me by letting me hear from you as soon after the receipt of this as your convenience will permit.

Respectfully, your obedient servant,

N. TOWSON.

To the Editor of the Courier :

The pen qualifies the sword, and the sword protects the pen; when both are wisely united, they constitute civilization; when separated, they mark a state

of savage life. The fame of Washington would fade away into fable were it not for the pen. The renown of Moses and Joshua, and David and Solomon, would not have reached us, had it not been borne on the wings of literature; but would have come down to us like the fame of Hercules, and Jason, and Theseus, and the stories of giants. If the sword protects the pen, the pen should, in return, protect the sword. We rarely find them happily united as in a Xenophon and a Julius Cæsar.

I had been led casually to notice a brave military character of our own country, without knowing any thing of his history, from observing now and then his remarkable deeds: first, in the Mediterranean, second, on Lake Erie, thirdly, on the coast of Brazil, and lastly, on the seaboard of South Carolina, when Gen. Scott commanded by land, in the unhappy difficulties of nullification; in all which it appears that Jesse D. Elliott conducted to the entire satisfaction of the Congress of the United States, and its President. His being selected to carry despatches to Mr. Pinckney, our Minister at the Court of Great Britain, is not worth mentioning, were it not to show that there was something about Mr. Elliott that elicited patronage; for he stood alone in the world, his father, Captain Robert Elliott, having been slain in battle with the Indians, when under the command of Gen. Wayne. He left a widow and nine children. Congress, exactly thirty years ago, when Nathaniel Macon was Speaker, Aaron Burr Vice-President, and Thomas Jefferson President, voted the sum of two thousand dollars to the widow and children of Robert Elliott, our Commodore being then but a school-boy.

He was born in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, (although the Port-Folio, Vol. IV., No. 6, says in Maryland.) We know not the year of his birth, but guess his age to be about fifty. He was two years at Dickinson College, in Pennsylvania, when Mr. Jefferson gave him a midshipman's commission, under which, it seems, he resolved to carve his way to distinction. He was on board the frigate Chesapeake when she was fired into by the British ship Leopard. After that disgraceful affair, he was transferred to the Essex, and went in her to the Mediterranean to check the Barbary Powers, who had captured a number of our countrymen, and held them in the bonds of slavery. Deep anxiety on their account pervaded this country, and great responsibility was annexed to this new service. It is a remarkable fact in our history, that the warlike Washington should be reconciled to pay tribute to those lawless corsairs, while peaceful Jefferson sent them powder and ball. Jefferson may be said to have, in a great measure, conquered the Mediterranean pirates. When he was our minister at the Court of France, he never ceased to denounce our humiliating practice of paying tribute to those buccaneers. It was the topic of many of his letters home.

Congress was enabled to send but a small force on this service, and our limited means of annoyance compelled our infant navy to pursue a system of masculine intrepidity, severe discipline, and promptitude of obedience, of which, even to the present hour, we feel the benefits. The ferocity and treachery of the enemy taught our officers and crew to be ever on the alert, while their cruelty created a boldness on our side, that partook, at times, of rashness. It was in such a Spartan school of war that our midshipman commenced his salt-water education. On that element he learned to smile at danger, and become familiar with it. He returned to the United States in 1811; and served on board the ship John Adams, whence he was transferred to the Argus, of which he acted as first lieutenant.

After we declared war against England, for impressing our seamen, and attacking, in time of peace, an unprepared frigate, it was determined, as the best means of drawing a British force off from the sea-ports, to divert their attention to their Canadian possessions; and Commodore Chauncey was with this view sent to Lake Erie on our part, and Sir James Yeo, on the side of the British, to counteract it. Chauncey was desirous of engaging Elliott in that service; whereupon, Lieutenant Elliott was honored by an appointment to a command on Lake Erie. This we assert on the authority of the Port-Folio, of December, 1814, which contains his life, with a portrait of him. That account adds, that "he received orders to repair to Lake Erie, with all possible despatch, purchase what private vessels he could, build two ships of twenty guns, and as early as possible have his fleet in readiness to meet that of the enemy."

The same authority, p. 330, adds—"Lieutenant Elliott knew the vast importance of the command of the Lakes in our war against Canada, and the difficulty and the delay which would attend the building of the vessels, and the expense. He had, in pursuance of his orders, purchased some vessels, but was embarrassed with the difficulty of getting them up the Niagara, and into the Lake; and he resolved to obtain them *ready made*. After revolving all the obstacles, he formed the heroic resolution of capturing two British brigs of war, that lay under the protection of the cannon of Fort Erie (which fortress we took from them since that period.) Elliot accordingly provided two boats with fifty men in each, and at one o'clock in the morning he came alongside of the *Detroit* and the *Caledonia*, lying under the protection of the Fort. He boarded, sword in hand, the two vessels of war, and carried them in ten minutes. He made one hundred and thirty prisoners, with their officers, and released forty of his own countrymen from captivity. They belonged to the 4th U. S. Regiment. Elliott entered the first man on boarding, and opposed three of the enemy with no other weapon than his cutlass."

I think I hear the reader inquire, with surprise—"How came I not ever to hear of this brilliant deed before?" I answer, because heroic men never brag—modesty and bravery go together, hand in hand. If individuals were silent, Congress were not, who passed the following resolve: "That the President of the United States be, and he is hereby authorized to have distributed, as prize money, to Lieutenant Elliott, his officers and companions, or to their widows and children, *twelve thousand dollars*, for the capture and destruction of the British brig *Detroit*;" and also, "Resolved, that the President of the United States be, and he is hereby requested to present to Lieutenant Elliott, of the Navy of the United States, an elegant sword, with suitable emblems and devices, in testimony of the just sense entertained by Congress of his gallantry and good conduct in boarding and capturing the British brigs *Detroit* and *Caledonia*, while anchored under the protection of *Fort Erie*."

The Hon. Henry Clay, when the new army bill was discussed in the House of Representatives, January, 1813, said—"The capture of the *Detroit*, and the destruction of the *Caledonia* (whether placed to our maritime or land account) for judgment, skill and courage on the part of *Lieutenant* [now *Commodore*] *Elliott*, HAS NEVER BEEN SURPASSED." See National Intelligencer, February 6, 1813, No. 1932.

Shortly after this brilliant exploit, Lieutenant Elliot joined Chauncey at Sackett's Harbor, who sailed on the 8th of November, with six schooners, in quest of the enemy's fleet, and on the same day fell in with the Royal George, but found her next morning riding in Kingston Channel, under the protection of the

English batteries. He immediately followed her into the Channel, and engaged her for nearly two hours, and determined to board her in the night; but the wind increasing and blowing directly on shore, the pilot would not venture, and the Commodore reluctantly gave up the attempt. On this occasion Lieutenant Elliott commanded the vessel destined to lead in the enterprize.

On the 24th of July, Mr. Elliott was promoted over *thirty* lieutenants to the rank of *master commandant*. Whether this honorable promotion, for there is no date of the year (a negligence too often complained of in American publications,) gave occasion to the unfriendly conduct of Commodore Perry, five years after their battle with the British (the 10th of September, 1813,) we are unable to say; for Perry's high eulogiums on Elliott at that time, and years afterwards, and his tacking about and contradicting them, has been a mystery to the writer, and a matter of deep regret, as *Oliver Hazard Perry* had his esteem, friendship and respect.

Captain J. D. Elliott commanded the *Madison* in Commodore Chauncey's fleet, which carried General Dearborn, with seventeen hundred men, to the attack of Fort George and York; but, finding that his ship could not be brought into action, by reason of the shoalness of the water, he asked the Commodore's permission to lead the small vessels employed to cover the landing of the troops, of which there is the following evidence of it:—

“GOSPORT NAVY YARD, MAY 24th, 1821.

“*To Capt. J. D. Elliott, U. S. Navy:*

“*Dear Sir*—I have the honor to acknowledge your communication, and feel a pleasure in stating that you were Flag-Captain of the Commodore's ship when the attack was made on York, Upper Canada. Your ship drawing too much water, could not get into action, and I know you volunteered to take the command of a schooner, and, to the best of my knowledge, you were the first in action.

Yours, &c.,

“J. MACPHERSON.”

From what has been said, it appears that our friend Elliott was always on the alert, always pushing forward in the road of danger, and always successful; and always a favorite of the government; and we venture to predict that he always will be, unless from disease, or some such sad calamity, he should, like some others, change his nature and his character.

In our next number we shall speak of a spirited transaction in the Mediterranean, with the Bey of Tunis(?) as recorded by Mordecai M. Noah, in page 383, of his *Travels in Europe and Africa*; for if *Jesse Duncan Elliott* is really, as we now believe, an highly meritorious officer, we are disposed, as far as in our power, to sustain him in his absence; and, if otherwise, leave him to the reproaches he may merit from his countrymen.

B. W.

Cambridge, March 4th, 1835.

U. S. FRIGATE CONSTITUTION, }
NEW YORK HARBOR, JULY 12th, 1835. }

To General Nathan Towson:

Sir—Your communication of the 6th instant, was duly received, and I have given it the careful consideration to which it was entitled, on account of its subject and the distinguished source from which it proceeds. I appreciate the delicacy which restrained you from moving in the affair during my absence, and which offers me the option as to the mode in which it shall be made public

now. The latter I must decline. What explanations I have to make must be made to yourself, with full permission to use them as you shall think expedient; I do not feel that the occasion requires me to volunteer a publication, and it is not my practice, nor would it accord with my feelings to force public attention unnecessarily to actions in which I have been engaged in the service of my country. Your position in this case is different from mine, and a publication by you will not be indelicate nor obtrusive.

Your letter complains that in my official report, dated October 9th, 1812, of the capture at Niagara Straits of the British vessels *Detroit* and *Caledonia*, by the expedition under my command, justice is not fully rendered to yourself, and the services of the party of artillerists, which you accompanied in one of the boats; and you request that I will supply the deficiency now. There is no man who more duly appreciates your high services and reputation than myself, and no man who would more reluctantly withhold from another his just meed of praise; but it does not appear that I can aid you in this case. I cannot, after a lapse of nearly a quarter of a century, undertake, upon the evidence of a single and not uninterested witness, to alter an official report, made upon the testimony and under the correction of all the actors in the affair; a report thus made and that has stood so long unquestioned, carries authority that its author cannot shake. It has become history, and nothing that is in my power to do now could alter it. Indeed, I could but state what you tell me, and which I now hear for the first time, though twenty-three years have passed since the occurrence; and my repetition of your statement would add nothing to its intrinsic weight. Besides, if my intervention had any influence whatever, it might rather tend to diminish that weight, because I should feel bound to speak as the defender of the fame of the gallant dead, which your statement in effect impeaches.

The orphan family of the lamented Watts has no dearer inheritance than the lustre of his actions, and that must not be tarnished by the hand of his old commander; it is late now for any to tarnish it. It appears then to me, that if you continue to desire the publication of your statement, it will proceed most properly from yourself, and I will cheerfully offer here such comments as occur to me upon its contents. There seems throughout your letter, and especially the latter portion of it, a disposition to depreciate the merit of the enterprise referred to, and to decry the part taken by its conductor. I am reluctant to suppose that this is prompted by any feeling akin to hostility, and I regret to observe it. For my part, I may aver that I never claimed more merit than my comrades awarded to me, and that I studiously, at all times, have endeavored to render full justice to them and their gallant services. That I did so in your own case, that official report itself bears witness.

You are there first named among the subordinate officers, whose gallantry is commended, though you volunteered as a private and had no command as far as I ever knew until now, when you inform me of it. That I did this in the case of others it may also testify. There stand prominently the names of the heroic Roach, Prestman and others, besides that of your commander Mr. Watts, who, soon after, sacrificed his life in spiking the guns that obstructed the invasion by General Smyth, who, with his command, then including yourself, looked on during the unimproved victory. Indeed, though you complain that the party of artillerists had not their sufficient fame, and invite me to amend the defective report of the action, you expressly defend me from any possible imputation of injustice.

You say that Mr. Watts, who commanded the boat in which you were placed, called on you for any statement that you might desire to offer, in order that I might embody it in my report; *you declined to make any* except to your superior officer, then Lieutenant Col. Scott, and that you have, therefore, no right to complain of the omission of any facts not known to me, and of which I could have had no knowledge. That, sir, is perfectly true, and the facts must defeat any suspicion of injustice on my part. The admission is the more generous—as—you will pardon the observation—it develops, not merely, a misapprehension of your duty, but an act of insubordination, the consequences of which, to yourself and your corps, you are now, after twenty-three years, endeavoring to remedy. Had you reported to me then, there would have been no occasion to report to me now.* A small party of private soldiers, without officers, were lent to me by the general; You and Captain Barker volunteered as privates on the expedition; one only was allowed to go, and you won the privilege by lot—you went as a private, and for the occasion, your only superior officer was myself. You were to obey and to report to me, and your refusal, when the latter was required, was as much a breach of duty as would disobedience have been.

Were it not for that step, your present communication would have been unnecessary. It is not apparent, sir, that you ever reported to General Scott; it is certain, at least, that he has made no statement on the subject; and it is inconsistent with his high, generous character, and perfect knowledge of all military duty, to ascribe his silence to any other cause than that he received no report from you, or that he justly considered himself not the quarter to which it should have been sent. I may remark, that this omission of your having refused to report to me, while it most completely exonerates me from any censure on account of the omission alledged, does not so clearly effect the object for which it was designed. You offer it as the answer to two questions thus stated by yourself.

“You will probably ask why, if your official report was considered incorrect, or not sufficiently particular in its details, it was not mentioned to you at the time, and why it has been permitted to remain thus long without explanation or correction?”

It would certainly be very natural to ask those questions, and impartial observers would hardly consider them conclusively answered by a statement, that, though called upon, you had refused to report to the officer commanding the expedition, and who alone was to make the report which you now seek to correct. Your withholding the report may account well enough for the alledged omission in the official statement; but it does not explain why that omission was not pointed out at the time, concerning, as it did, an affair so important, that it is a “sacred duty” to your companions to adjust it now.

As to the second of the two questions, the answer seems particularly defective; nor does the further explanation offered appear less so. It seemed a small matter, you say, not worth public attention. Has the death of Captain Schenck increased its intrinsic importance? Did the publication in the *Courier* render your duty to your comrades more sacred than it was originally? The *Courier* said nothing of the details of the action, nor of the subordinates in the enterprise. It spoke, and professed to speak, only of the share of the commander. Even of him the writer said nothing new—he merely quoted from an article in a magazine published twenty years ago, statements which have been before the world all that time, and open all that time to notice and animadversion.

* See Major Bankhead's letter in Appendix.

The answer to the second question will appear to the reader quite as unsatisfactory as the answer to the first.

I have always respected and borne cheerful testimony to your gallantry and services, and I certainly feel not the slightest inclination to do otherwise now. But your intimation made, as if disparagingly, that my boat's party had more luck than fighting, while that to which you were attached met with a desperate resistance, will excuse me for reminding you that an enemy is never surprised, except by those who exert activity and prompt energy. That the two boats had an equal force of fifty men each. That I assigned to the boat in which you were the easier task of capturing a trading vessel defended by twelve men, including officers, with two small guns and small arms only, while I chose for my own object, a public armed brig mounting six guns, with a crew of fifty-six men, directed by naval discipline. How long your boat was occupied by her task you can best tell. That both boats succeeded, the public know. But that our effecting a surprise implies the absence of resistance, is very far from the fact.

I was myself assailed by three men, armed with cutlasses, at the moment when I sprung on the deck, and the surprise gained us nothing, except a hand-to-hand fight with an enemy superior in numbers. In the official report equal credit is given to both boats; or, if there be any difference, yours, which had the easiest task, has the advantage in the report also. I am not criticising nor attempting to refute your communication, but merely touching here and there upon such points as appear singular or prominent, and I do not, therefore, attempt to notice now all your remarks, nor to correct, by my official records, the errors into which you have fallen. I deprecate controversy at all times, and certainly not less with an officer of your standing and character with whom I have been associated in youthful enterprize, and I trust that no real cause will ever occur to cloud the friendly relations which have so long, as I flattered myself, existed between us.

The present is not a subject on which a difference could gracefully arise, nor am I able to perceive how any good can possibly accrue to your bringing it before the public. But of that I am not to be the judge, nor will I obtrude any advice on the subject. As I remarked in the commencement, these observations are entirely at your disposal.

I have the honor to be, respectfully,

Your obedient servant,

J. D. ELLIOTT.

WASHINGTON, JULY 18, 1835.

To Commodore J. D. Elliott,

Sir—I have received your letter of the 12th, in answer to mine of the 6th instant. I regret that you should have misunderstood my object in addressing you. It was not to *complain* of your official report, and *request* you to supply the deficiency now: it was, simply, to offer you the opportunity of correcting, yourself, that part of the publication I enclosed to you, that relates to the capture of the *Caledonia*, and which ascribes to you acts that, from the circumstances of the case, could not have been, and, as you know, were not performed by you. I referred to your official report to show that it is not alone sufficient to refute the statement; but, by its omissions, rather sustains it. I expressly disclaimed all *right* to complain of those omissions, as I declined furnishing you

the facts at the time it was made; and I wish you distinctly to understand, that if I had believed I had just cause of complaint, there would have been no delay in urging it; but not in the language of solicitation.

You seem to think it would be indelicate in you to publish any thing on the subject; and say it is not your practice, nor would it accord with your feelings, to force public attention, unnecessarily, to actions in which you have been engaged in the service of your country. In this case your friends have "forced public attention, unnecessarily," to your actions, and I do not perceive any more indelicacy in your noticing it, than there would be (if they claimed for you the property of another,) in your saying—it is none of mine. Some unknown person has recently sent me a newspaper, printed in Ohio, in which there is a paragraph or two, relating to this very subject, giving me credit that belongs to you. This I intend to correct; believing it would be as dishonorable in me to wear your honors, as it would to wear your apparel.

I did not ask, nor did I expect you to publish my letter. I went somewhat into detail in communicating facts that would have been stated in my report, if I had made one to you; believing you would prefer communicating, yourself, such of them to the public *as you knew to be correct*. You knew, for instance, that you did not communicate with our boat after we separated on leaving Buffalo Creek. You knew our boat boarded and carried the Caledonia after a sharp conflict, before you captured the Detroit; and I presume you must have known that Mr. Watts left the brig the next morning, with the prisoners and seamen, soon after the enemy commenced firing on her; and that the artillery remained on board, landed the greater part of the cargo, and brought the vessel near in shore; and you certainly know that you intended she should be burnt, as well as the Detroit, to prevent the enemy's getting possession of her; and that she would have been burnt if I had permitted your order to be executed. These facts are all known to you, and do not rest "upon the evidence of a single and not uninterested witness." What occurred in the boat between Mr. Watts, the pilot, and myself, about the practicability of reaching the Caledonia, on account of the current, could not have been known to you, unless communicated by Mr. Watts; and it was not, therefore, expected you would say any thing about it. You knew the credit for commanding, in person, the boarders that captured that vessel, belonged either to Mr. Watts or myself, and not to you; and this was all it was expected you would state. I have no wish to do Mr. Watts injustice. It was his opinion the brig could not be approached, and although the event proved he was wrong, the difficulty in doing it showed that he had good grounds for his belief.

In your "comments" on my letter, you say—"It here seems throughout your letter, and especially the latter portion of [it,] a disposition to depreciate the merits of the enterprize referred to, and to decry the part taken by its conductor. I am reluctant to suppose this is prompted by any feelings akin to hostility, and I regret to observe it." I will be candid with you on that as on every other subject. I do think that you might have made greater efforts to have brought the Detroit into harbor before you abandoned her; that the circumstances under which she was burnt, if such as to justify the act, did not imperiously require it, and that it was not in keeping with the chivalrous daring which could plan and execute so hazardous an enterprize as the boarding, with an inferior force, and capturing "a public armed brig, mounting six guns, with a crew of fifty-six men directed by naval discipline."

Some years past I was applied to, by a personal friend of Commodore Perry,

for a statement of the facts contained in the last paragraph, to be used to your prejudice, in the controversy then pending between you; but I refused to give it; informing him that I had no *official* claim on you, as he supposed, for neglecting me in your report; and that the fact of your planning and undertaking so hazardous an enterprize removed from my mind all suspicion of what, many of Commodore Perry's friends seemed to suppose, had prevented your aiding him in the action on Lake Erie, as he expected. Candor requires me to say that I then, and until lately, did believe the Detroit was commanded by a regular officer of the British navy. If such was not the fact, as I am informed, and that the commander was your relative, the enterprize, in my judgment, loses much of its daring character.

I did not expect, nor did I wish, any thing to be said in correcting the article of which I complain, that would detract from the credit the public have awarded you so far as relates to the Detroit, and planning the capture of the other brig. My object in submitting to you a comparison of the service performed by the two parties, was to show that, although you undertook that which appeared to be infinitely the more hazardous, it did not turn out to be so; and, as the result shows, our boat had its full share of fighting and danger. It was not your fault, but your good fortune, that your adversary was not more vigilant; that he permitted you to make a prize of him at the cost of one man "lost" and "one officer wounded," instead of annihilating you, as he had the power to do with his superior force and advantages, and as I believe would have been done had he been a regular officer of the British navy, especially after knowing by what occurred to our boat, that an enemy was near him.

I cannot allow that time cancels the claims of truth and justice; and that a report which remains unquestioned, until "it becomes history," cannot be altered by its author. But my business is not with your report, but with the statement of an anonymous writer, who now claims for you all merit in relation to this matter, some of which I think belongs to others. You think it too late to relinquish it, as the writer has said nothing new of you, "he merely quoted from an article in a magazine, published twenty years ago, statements that have been before the world all that time, and open all that time to notice and animadversion." I know that legal claims are sometimes barred, on account of time, by legislative enactments; but I believe there is no limitation known to the moral code or to courts of honor. Until I saw the publication, copied from the Courier, I did not know that your biography had ever been written; much less that it contained such a statement. or I assure you I should not now be taunted with having let the subject rest for twenty years; for, although I deprived myself of the right to complain of the official injustice of the omissions in your report, I never had a doubt of the propriety of resisting the attempt, of any one, to deprive me of a just right.

You say—"It is not apparent, sir, that you even reported to General Scott. It is certain, at least, that he has made no statement on the subject, and it is inconsistent with his high, generous character, and perfect knowledge of all military duty, to ascribe his silence to any other cause than that he received no report from you, or that he justly considered himself not the quarter to which it should have been sent." How have you, sir, arrived at the certainty "that he never made no statement on the subject?" You recollect the battle of Queenstown followed soon after the capture of the brigs. Our detachment was put in motion immediately after I joined it, and from that time until we arrived at Queenstown, where this distinguished officer was captured, he had no time to

make a report. The following extract from one of his letters to me, shows that, although delayed by his capture, it was not neglected. "In that letter [referring to a previous one,] I informed you of a conversation had with the secretary upon the subject of the capture of the British vessels from under Fort Erie, and of the distinguished part which you bore in that enterprize. He thought you entitled to a *brevet*. This was on the way from Philadelphia to Baltimore. At Washington, I recalled his attention to the subject in a strong written statement. I have no doubt the commission will issue, and I trust without further delay."

The *brevet* he mentions has been conferred; and is one by which I obtained my present rank.

I must now call your attention to the charge of officers of the army having served with you as privates. This is not the first time you have used that argument, and retracted it in the way I shall now state. You recollect that you handed me the prize-tickets for my command at Fort George, remarking that I would find mine with the rest; I put the bundle in my pocket, and we separated. When I came to examine them, I found my rank was not recognized in the ticket. Supposing it to be a mistake, I laid it by until I should again meet with you, or have an opportunity for explanation. We met, for the first time after the receipt of the ticket, at General Scott's marque, at Buffalo. Knowing that I was to meet you, I put the ticket in my pocket. When we met, I required an explanation, remarking at the same time, that when I embarked in the expedition, I did not dream of prize-money; and if the object in assigning to me the share of a private was to increase the amount to be divided among the other captors, I would make you a compliment of the whole—offering you the ticket; but that before I could hold friendly intercourse with you, I must know why it was that I had been designated as a private. You then explained, that under the regulations of the navy, at the time the ticket was made out, you were not privileged to give any other; but that the regulation had since been changed, and you were then at liberty to do me justice, by recognizing my rank in another ticket, which you soon afterwards sent to me.

You will recollect, that at a subsequent meeting I refused to receive your offered hand, and to hold intercourse with you, until I ascertained by inquiry at the Navy Department, that there was no established rule for distributing prize-money to troops serving with the navy at the date of the first ticket. I did not then, nor do I now, think this a full justification of your course; for although you were not expressly directed to give to the officers of the army tickets corresponding with their rank, you were not prohibited from doing so; and, at least, it was due to them, as an act of courtesy, to explain why you did not.

Do you suppose, sir, that officers of the army have so little self-respect that they would consent to serve as privates in their proper commands, for the honor and advantage of officers of the navy? If there had been marines, whose services you could *command*, would you have expected their officers to have served with them as privates? Or did you expect an officer of the army would consent, or be required, to furnish you his command, without accompanying it on such a service? As the detachment of artillery required on that occasion was less than a captain's command, General Scott suggested that it should be furnished by the two companies, in equal proportions, and the command be given to the adjutant of the detachment, the gallant, and afterwards eminently distinguished,* Major

* See letters of General Smyth and Major Bankhead in Appendix.

Roach, against which Captain Barker and myself remonstrated in the most decided terms, notwithstanding the entire confidence we had in that officer, and the strong friendship, (not to say brotherly affection,) we entertained for him. Nay, so tenacious were Captain Barker and myself on that point, that had the rank been settled between us, we should have considered it derogatory to have waived the claim of seniority; but as it was not, we agreed to decide it by lot. No officer of the army, who is worthy to hold a commission, would consent to serve in the *ranks* with his own men, for the purpose of increasing a naval command; such a proposition is too absurd to require refutation. My understanding was, that the command of the seamen, and every thing relating to the management of the boat, and to the navigation of the brig, after capture, belonged to Mr. Watts; but the entire command of the troops belonged to me. If you are correct as to the conditions on which the officers of the army, who had commands, volunteered, why did you not maintain it when I spoke to you about the prize-ticket? Why did you change that given to private Towson, for one as "captain?"

I do not agree that I was bound to report to you after I landed. My command, it is true, performed a subordinate duty; but if it deserved praise or censure, it was to be received from our military superiors. It was proper that our conduct should be represented to the War Department; and you were not the channel of communication. The rule on this subject, both in the army and navy, is too well settled to be questioned now.

I will say one word in relation to your report. Although I had no official claim on you for more notice than you bestowed on my command, I should have felt deeply mortified at having dealt as sparingly with you, had I been in your place, and made a report with the same knowledge of facts.

I have commented at great length on your letter, and with plainness, under the belief, that between gentlemen of our profession there should be perfect frankness.

I deprecate controversy as much as you can, and regretted the suspension of our friendly intercourse heretofore, as I do on this occasion. You seem to think it never was suspended; whether it is to be renewed hereafter, must depend on yourself.

It is my present intention to claim for my command what I think belongs to it, by a brief statement in the public prints; and to disclaim what has been improperly taken from you and given to me. I have no wish to trouble the public with this correspondence, unless circumstances should make it necessary, but leave you at perfect liberty to do so if you think proper.

Respectfully, your obedient servant,

N. TOWSON.

U. S. FRIGATE CONSTITUTION, }
NEW YORK HARBOR, July 23, 1835. }

To General Nathan Towson,

Sir—Your letter of the 18th inst. reached me yesterday. The perusal of it gave me surprise as well as pain. It was painful to see an officer of your reputation involve himself in what I must call so discreditable a manner. I felt surprise, that neither your experience nor your counsellors had been able to save you from the misfortune. You have placed yourself in a predicament so unfortunate, that I believe no gentleman or officer ever incurred the like; and you appear resolved to force me to exhibit you thus to the public. Your

reputation ascribes intelligence to you at least; and I feel astonished that, after my letter of the 12th, you should persevere in advancing the absurd claims for which you opened this correspondence. Whether your demand was prompted by restless vanity alone, and you fancied that you might regain public attention, and, perhaps, some slight additional credit, or whether you were urged on by some designing persons of more talent than honesty, is of little moment; in either case, it is very strange that, after reading my letter, you did not perceive that it would be prudent for you to let the affair rest unstirred. I showed you, as delicately as I could, how fatal the discussion upon the claims you advanced must be to your reputation, and intimated my willingness to leave you safe in its oblivion. You appear to have been either incapable of comprehending your danger, and to listen only to the craving for notoriety, or to have been impelled forward by hostility to me, whether of your own, or of some one who does not appear. The general circumstances seem to indicate the former—the tenor of your letters, especially the last, points to the latter. Be it which it may, I am indifferent; no one can know you better than yourself; and if I judge you by your own showing in these letters, you are not one whom I would ever call friend. You must pardon my plainness, sir; I write frankly, and employ no attorney—for *I* at least have no *special pleading* to do. I used what measure of courtesy I could compass in my former letter; the tenor of your reply, and the light in which you there exhibit yourself, will excuse me from any effort now to wrap up honest meanings in courtly phrases; nor can I spare time to follow you through all the petty points of your pleading; the principal ones I will dispose of as briefly as may be, leaving the straws to float or sink with them. The chief subjects on which we are at issue are very few; the capacity in which you attended the expedition is the most prominent. I have asserted that you went as a private; you distinctly and deliberately affirm that you commanded the soldiers—and on this, and one other point, turns the discussion. I will not cloud it by circumlocution, but will meet your assertion by a direct contradiction, and by indisputable evidence.

I need not copy your statement, and the explanations given to support it; mine is this: by the copies of letters from General Van Rensselaer to Major General Hall and myself, which are annexed, you will perceive that I could have had militia; but knowing that they had wives and families, and that the regular troops for the most part had not, I concluded to take the latter, and applied for the loan of some, *without officers*, who could rank my subordinates, as I designed the latter to retain the command. The general acceded to my request, and directed his brigade-major to detail the troops, which were placed under Ensign Prestman, and were commanded by him. I annex an extract from the letter of the brigade-major himself, and the letter from the general, brought by Ensign Prestman, to prove these facts. You and Captain Barker volunteered *as privates*; one only was accepted—and the lot fell on you. You went as a private, under Ensign Prestman, who commanded the troops. The same evidence will establish these facts also. If it does not establish them all, I have no other testimony, save my own word, in my possession. But it must; it is irrefragable. You dare not contradict Major Bankhead; you cannot contradict the letter of General Smyth, written at the very time, and showing beyond question, that Prestman was designated for the command, and brought me the troops. If it *does* establish them, *in what light do you stand?* After you were reminded of these facts, and had ample opportunity to consult records, as well as your memory, you deliberately assert, and through pages endeavor to prove,

that you went in command of the troops—and all for the purpose of effecting the poor scheme, prompted by some designing knave, or your own vanity, of getting a dispute with me, or some additional credit for yourself.

Your stand, sir, in the attitude of one who has made a well considered, deliberate assertion, to his own profit and the injury of others, and then has the utter incorrectness of his assertion *proved* by the clearest and most direct evidence. It is an unpleasant attitude for an officer and a gentleman. I would, if I could, suppose that you believed your statement yourself, but the facts do not warrant the assumption; they are not of the kind about which one could mistake. You complain of my report. If you went as a private, that document gave you even more than your full share of praise. If you commanded the troops, the question will still arise, why have twenty-three years been suffered to pass without an effort from you to claim what you say was due to you? But you *were* then a private, and your assertion of the contrary now is as unworthy and unfortunate, as it is foreign from truth. I must place this point strongly, unwilling as I am to see General Townson take such a position, because on this depends really the whole controversy, for it is the foundation of it. If your word is good on this point, against the clearest evidence, it is good for all the rest also—but *not otherwise*.

It would have been well, sir, had you comprehended the tenor of my former letter, for it might have saved you. I intimated clearly enough, though delicately, that my real reason for declining the step you proposed was my *knowledge* that your statement was not true, and it is unlucky that you did not understand me. You are proved now, sir, to have stated deliberately and repeatedly what was untrue. But there is more in it—and the degree of stolidity exhibited in your course is absolutely unexampled. If I could be persuaded that you had, after sailing, assumed the command of the boat, I should be forced to condemn you even more severely, if that were possible, than I do now. If you are correct on that point, you not only broke an engagement to which your honor was pledged, but you were guilty of insubordination and mutiny, for which you might even now be brought to a Court Martial. You were accepted only as a private; by offering as such you virtually pledged your honor that you would act as such, and would not use your authority with the soldiers to take the command. We were wrong, then, in trusting you, and you broke your word of honor, to your general, to his brigade-major, and to your equally brave, but I hope more trustworthy competitor, Captain Barker. All this results, if we believe your assertion that you assumed the command. But there is more—the terms on which you went *made* you a private for the time—if you got the command you were guilty of insubordination to the extent that constitutes *mutiny*, and your moral crime was quite as great as though you owned no commission, and cannot be atoned for, if it can even be palliated, by the result of the expedition.

You have had the credit, sir, of volunteering on a dangerous enterprize as a private when you could not go as an officer, and your vanity, or your managers, have prompted you to reject that, and to claim what did not belong to you, and even is not merit, though you deem it so. You would persuade us that you took advantage of our confidence in your honor to get among us, in a boat in which *I was not*, and to snatch then by fraud from the gallant Prestman* the honor of commanding a portion of the victorious party; and your tale would rob, also, the heroic Watts of *his* honors. But that, sir, *it shall not effect*. 1

* See letters of General Smyth and Major Bankhead in Appendix.

step with you into his sepulchre, to defend what you would wrench away, and I do defend his rights by *proving* your tale untrue. I save even you, also, by restoring the credit which you would discard—of having volunteered as a private under a subordinate officer. It was well done, sir, and well has it been rewarded.

Another principal point is as to the preservation of the *Caledonia*, and the burning of the *Detroit*. On both these you are as widely in error as in the former, and this part may be disposed of in few words. You mistake entirely my reason for burning the *Detroit*. I had, and could have, no fear that the enemy would remove, if they retook her, for she was riddled with shot and unable to float; she had already sunk, and was aground, full of water. But I burned her to *save the guns in her hold*, which were invaluable to us. Had her masts been left, the enemy might have raised and carried them off; they were prevented, and subsequently we erected shears and got out the guns.

In relation to the other brig, also, you are entirely wrong. I never had a thought of burning her. There was no occasion for it, as, at the time of which you speak, she lay in safety at the Navy Yard, under protection of our battery. Besides, naval officers do not send a nameless sailor with combustibles and a *verbal* order, as you allege, to burn vessels that are lying in perfect safety. *The Detroit* was burned by Captain Chambers, of the 5th Infantry, at my request. Your recollection is quite as unfortunate on this point, as it was relative to the capacity in which you served in an expedition of which half the merit you claim to yourself.

I have letters from officers, eye witnesses, that contradict to the letter almost every thing you alledge respecting the closing incidents of the enterprize, but they would occupy much space, and really your personal testimony does not stand in that degree of credit that might require corroboration of my own opposing evidence, and of that of circumstances, and we may pass this head as answered. I will furnish one extract, however, to show that I had no reason for burning the *Caledonia*, as I did not believe the enemy had landed. It is from the letter of Major Myers, then Captain in 13th Infantry.*

I have thus noticed the two principal subjects at issue between us, and I may presume it is done to your conviction, if not to your satisfaction. As I said above, I cannot advert to every minute allegation in your unfortunate letter, but a few I may take up to use as specimens of the rest.

And first, you state that the boat which contained the party that attacked the *Caledonia* had no communication with the other after starting. This is incorrect; the boats started from the same place, at the same time. The boat in which you were, was steered by mine, and if you did not see our boat, we distinguished yours quite plainly. Sailing Master Watts had his instructions to keep near my boat, to board, carry, and bring over to Buffalo the brig *Hunter*, which the *Caledonia* was supposed to be. Thus your inexperience in naval proceedings but serves to expose your presumption.

You argue, for several pages, that it was impossible and improbable that you acted as a private, and you declare that “no officer of the army who is *worthy to hold commission* would consent to serve in the ranks with his own men, to increase a naval command.” Perhaps so. I differ from you; but I have proved that you did that very thing—that is, that you *consented*, nay, offered. But you say you violated your engagement! This is hardly worth while, but it affords occasion to notice the very elaborate argument by which you are made to sus-

* See letter of Capt. Myers in Appendix.

tain your assertion that you went in command of the soldiers, and to remark how completely the argument is upset by the simple fact that you *did not* go thus. It would seem almost that you could not have even read that last letter to which your name is signed, so extraordinary are the violations of truth, or the lapses of memory which it develops. Here is a monstrous one that shows your recollection is not good even from the 6th to the 18th of July—12 days. Under the latter date you tell me, in order to account for the long neglect of this matter, that you *did not know* that such a statement (that which you impeach) had ever been made, or you certainly would not have been taunted with twenty years' delay. You had forgotten that on the 6th you wrote that you had been *frequently advised* to come out with a statement on the subject, *but* that you thought it *a small matter*, not important enough to interest the public. Controversialists should have their facts settled, or good memories, or not change their *amanuenses*.

You are right, sir, in saying that a report may be amended by its author, even after it "becomes history;" but then it must be upon ample evidence, and full conviction of its inaccuracy—and never upon such testimony as yours is proved in the case discussed.

Your distinction is quite right, also, between limitations in law and in honor; but you see it does not apply here. What I said was, that it was too late to alter a well proved report upon the appeal of "a single and not uninterested witness," who had tacitly confirmed it at the time; and the new evidence bears me out. These are slight points, and you will pardon the desultory character of my notices—I take up the topics as I turn the leaves.

Your complaint about your prize ticket is answered by yourself in the record that when you received the ticket, the regulations of the navy allowed me to give you only a private's ticket; but that when those were changed, I gave you a captain's. By the way, you appear to make no account of the favor. I may have done wrong in that case, and it is possible that in allowing private Towson a captain's share, I did injustice to Mr. Watts and the rest, who, or their representatives, may have a claim upon you or me for it. But I might plead that I admired what I thought your gallantry in waving your rank to seek danger, and that my feelings influenced me, as when in my report, I named you before even Prestman, whom your general made your real commander, and Roach, who was in the boat with myself, both of whom have been presented warmly to the War Department, who hold a high place in my recollection, whom I am proud to claim as my personal friends, and who are now uncoupled with the service.* You have shown me my error, but this might answer your question as to my reason for changing your ticket.

But I will give you the real explanation. You misunderstood, or misrepresented me, as you have done in so many other cases. What I told you was, that when I gave you a private's ticket, I understood the regulations to allow you no other; but that it afterwards occurred to me that a part of the prize money belonged to grades of rank not represented, and I resolved, therefore, to allow you an officer's ticket. You had no absolute right to it, but I was willing to do you a favor. That is the real state of the case, yet from that favor has grown one of your principal charges against me.

As to your alledged refusal once to take my hand, I have not the slightest recollection of any such occurrence, and there is the best reason for placing little confidence in yours.

* See letters of Ensign Prestman and Major Roach, in the Appendix.

I do not believe the assertion. The only conversation between us that I remember on such a subject, was in Washington, twelve or fifteen years ago, when you requested a conference, spoke of my recent coldness, asked if it was not on account of a then recent publication in a Pittsburg paper (stating in general terms that justice had not been done you) and learning that it was, you disavowed all agency or part in the matter. Upon that disavowal, I gave you my hand, which you accepted eagerly, and, to my knowledge, nothing else of the kind ever occurred between us.

You ask how I know that General Scott never reported concerning my expedition. In two ways: the report was never seen, and General Scott would never have done me such discourtesy as to report concerning my subordinates, except as from me. The point was trivial and incidental, but with the fatality which has marked your every step in this affair, it has hung more suspicion upon you.

You say that he wrote a private letter of such a nature as to procure for you the brevet by which you obtained your present rank. I am sorry to hear it. There was thrift in view, then, if you withheld what you call your report from the commander of the expedition! If you had confided your merits to him, they would have been published under the correction of your companions, and you would have received your exact share of glory, enhanced only by his partiality. But you did better—you made a *private* report of your achievements to General Scott that was never published, and which none could contradict; and believing you, as we did when we accepted you as a volunteer private, he so represented it, of course upon *your* testimony, as to obtain for you the brevet which has made you a general officer! It looks like a piece of skillful management!

You compare the difficulties encountered by the two boats, and remark that though mine undertook what seemed to be the more arduous and dangerous task, it did not prove to be so; and your reasons are, that I carried the Detroit with slight loss, and speedily, while Mr. Watts had a hard fight, and incurred great loss. I had the honor, sir, to explain, in my former letter, why a surprise in such a case may succeed, or fail, and beg to refer you to the passage. You intimate that our enemy was commanded by a provincial officer, less skillful than one of the line; true, but if you measure thus, remember that my fifty men beat fifty-six, and took the heavily armed vessel with little loss, while the fifty, of whom you were one, had but twelve antagonists—*citizens* commanded by a *citizen*—in a merchant vessel, to make all the slaughter of which you complain.

On another topic, which you bring in, I can scarcely speak calmly. Sir, do you not perfectly know—have you not ever known—that, until after the capture of the Detroit was completely effected, and the sword of her commander was yielded, both that officer and myself were entirely ignorant of even each other's existence? and that, despite the distant connection by marriage between my half brother and him, we had never met, nor seen each other, nor had the slightest communication? Sir, you must have known all this well, and the nature of your reference to that accidental and unknown connection is one of the least worthy features in your letter.

I remember, in a letter of Commodore Perry's, a remark of this kind: "I would not allow myself to come to a decided opinion that an officer who had on a former occasion so handsomely conducted himself (as I then, in common with the public, had been led to suppose Captain Elliott had) could possibly be guilty,"

&c. It was a singular expression that! Had "*been led to suppose!*" Who had flung the *doubt*? I have never found a clue. *You* tell me that you have been tampered with by Commodore Perry's friends—*you* now fling an impeachment of my conduct on that "former occasion!" *You* tell me that you "*always* thought it strange that the Detroit should have been captured so quickly," &c. You kept it well from me! *Were* you, then, the incendiary that kindled dissension between Perry and me?—that turned our frank friendship into hatred on his part? Were *you* the viper that stung?—was it you that crept between us, and embittered our kindly feelings? Were you *thus* avenging the slight part which only could be assigned you in that enterprize, which still haunts you? I cannot believe it—it is impossible that one who possesses your reputation could be guilty of this inconceivable baseness! There was no cause, no sufficient motive, for such tremendous wickedness. We do not expect such things from the frank, gallant soldier. And yet the act was of a class to be done by the creeping, sly, profit-making spirits who hang around commanders, and make private reports of their own brave deeds, and get brevets for them. But no—it could not be you. Yet I would give much to know who it was. The foul wrong has clung to me to this day, and I am not patient under it.

One point escaped me, in your former communication, which can be here answered. You say that "if Mr. Watts or the seamen had remained, or returned after the cargo was landed, we should have been able to have brought the vessel into port." Mr. Watts and his brave companions had a more noble employment than removing furs; they were at the battery at Black Rock, under my immediate direction, in desperate fight, and many of them left their gory bodies there as testimonials of the desperate conflict of that morning.

But to have done with this. I consider, sir, that you are set on by my enemies to bait me, or that your own vanity has instigated you to make yourself gain at my expense, and that you pursue your aim in a spirit of determined hostility. I thought so in reading your first letter; but the hazard to yourself was so fearful that I presumed you would have prudence enough to desist when that was pointed out to you. I have observed less restraint now, as is natural toward a determined foe, but I still think you will have caution enough to avoid publication. If you have not, I shall simply publish this correspondence.

Your obedient servant,

J. D. ELLIOTT.

On July 29th a letter was received from Genl. Towson, bearing his frank and seal, which evidently was not such as it had been intimated to him would *only* be received. It was, therefore, returned unopened with the following:

U. S. SHIP CONSTITUTION, HARBOR OF {
NEW YORK, JULY 29, 1835. }

To General Nathan Towson,

Sir—I informed you in my letter of the 23d, that I should with that close the correspondence. The tenor of that paper was such, that any further communication from you must, to be received, be of that kind that is sent, not through the post-office and sealed, but by a friend. Your letter, mailed on the 27th, is therefore returned unopened.

(Signed)

J. D. ELLIOTT.

The following note was delivered on board the Constitution, August 17th, by Dr. Macaulay, with the observation that he wished to make some remarks relative to it, and a request that Com. Elliott would appoint a friend with whom he might confer. To this Com. Elliott replied, by introducing him to Col. Canonge, who was waiting in his after cabin in readiness for such an emergency. Com. Elliott had been, at that time, three days under sailing orders, and was lying off Staten Island.

NEW YORK, AUGUST 17, 1835.

Sir—My friend, Doctor Macaulay, waits on you with a proposition from me. If you accede to it, he is authorized, on my part, to make the arrangements for our meeting.

With due respect, &c.

(Signed)

N. TOWSON.

Commodore J. D. Elliott.

The note below was sent by Col. Canonge as a reply to the above, in conformity with the advice of that gentleman, after his interview with Dr. Macaulay, who left the ship, it was understood, fully comprehending that a meeting was arranged for the following morning at 6 o'clock; all preparations for which had been made—place, distance, time and arms being specified. Col. Canonge and Dr. Macaulay went to town together to confer with Gen. Towson.

U. S. SHIP CONSTITUTION, {
AUGUST 17, 1835. }

Sir—The note which you presented to me to-day, I can only receive as a challenge. If this is intended, you are referred to my friend, Col. Canonge, for other necessary arrangements.

Your obedient servant,

(Signed)

J. D. ELLIOTT.

Dr. Macaulay, present.

The affair was subsequently brought to an unexpected close by the following reply, which was brought on board the frigate by Col. Canonge, after his interview with Gen. Towson.

NEW YORK, AUGUST 17, 1835.

Sir—I was not authorized by General Towson to offer his note to you as a challenge, but to make the following proposition; "That you should select an officer or other friend, who, with myself, should decide, under the existing circumstances, the party who should send the challenge; and further, should he be the challenged party, that he waves any advantage from that circumstance." These propositions you rejected.

Very respectfully, your obed't serv't,

(Signed)

C. MACAULY.

Commodore Elliott, U. S. Frigate Constitution.

The letter to Dr. Holland was sent, as will be seen from the date, in the interval between Com. Elliott's returning Genl. Towson's letter of July 29th, and his receiving the message by Dr. Macaulay on the 17th of August—an interval so long as to warrant the opinion that Genl. Towson was inclined to carry the matter no farther.

It may be well to observe, that Col. Canonge, on the receipt of Gen. Towson's last note, returned on board the *Constitution* during the night, and advised Com. Elliott that, having done all in *his* power to bring the affair to an issue, he had now only to go to sea, leaving the farther defence of his reputation to Col. Canonge.

U. S. SHIP CONSTITUTION, {
NEW YORK, AUG. 11, 1835. }

To William Holland, Esq.

Dear Sir—About to sail on a cruise of some duration, I cannot depart without expressing to you my high sense of the friendly zeal with which the *New York Times* has repelled the attacks directed against me by a partisan press. I concur with you in the opinion, that political feelings, if not political views, have contributed, with private hostility, to prompt those attacks; and the friends of the administration will, I trust, note with approbation the able defence for which personally I feel so grateful.

The numerous quarters whence these arrows were launched, and their simultaneous appearance, indicate a concert of action, which could only result from some deliberate plan directed by concealed agents, and such I believe to have existed. You will perceive from the correspondence, copies of which are enclosed, that while your press was defending me against those whom my situation precluded my noticing in person, another branch of the scheme was in operation which I could meet myself. The application of General Towson was so extraordinary, the claim so unfounded, that I cannot doubt his being instigated by some of those who have banded themselves against me. The strong suspicion that the recent public and private attacks upon me were prompted from the same quarter, will probably appear to you to be well nigh justified, if you compare a passage in General Towson's second letter, with a passage in one of the articles of the *Courier and Enquirer*. I mean that, asserting that family connections of mine were engaged in that war on the side of the enemy. My reply to General Towson will show you how idle is such an assertion: but the facts, that the alledged connection has, never so far as I know, and I should be likely to know it, been stated or alluded to, in any newspaper or publication whatever—that the empty gossip had probably been heard by very few only—and that now, for the first time, it should be brought up by General Towson, in a letter to me, almost simultaneously by the *Courier and Enquirer* in its columns—certainly afford plausible grounds for the idea, that on that point at least, if not throughout, the same hand directed the attack in both quarters.

As to the officer alluded to, although my enemy, I am bound to say that his conduct, so far from being suspected by his countrymen, was, I have heard, considered by them to deserve the compliment of a sword and a dinner, which were paid him at Montreal.

You are welcome to show the correspondence to any of your friends, and indeed I know no reason on my part, for objecting to its publication, if that be deemed advisable. I have now allowed General Towson twelve days since my last note to him, for any ulterior steps he might choose to take; and as he is

silent, I presume he intends to go no further. For the rest, he certainly has no right to claim the suppression of the correspondence, and he distinctly intimates in his last, an intention to make a statement on the subject of it; whether he has thought better of it, and abandoned his purpose, or whether he withholds it only until I shall have sailed, is of course matter for conjecture alone. But, in any case, he certainly has no claims on my forbearance. I put the correspondence in your hands, to be used as you shall judge proper.

With the reiteration of my grateful acknowledgments of your kindness, accept also assurances of the high respect and esteem with which I remain,

Yours truly,

(Signed)

J. D. ELLIOTT.

On Monday, the 19th, the day after Commodore Elliott's sailing for the Mediterranean, the following paragraph appeared in the New York Courier and Enquirer:—

“MONDAY, 11, P. M.—We have just been informed, that a friend of General Towson waited upon Elliott, on board the Constitution, yesterday afternoon, and submitted the following proposition:—

“‘General Towson authorizes me to propose, that Commodore Elliott should select an officer or other friend, who with myself shall decide, under existing circumstances, which party shall challenge; and further, should he (General Towson,) be the challenged party, he agrees to wave any advantage arising from that position.’

“This proposition, after an hour's deliberation, was peremptorily rejected.”

In consequence of the above paragraph, Col. Canonge called (as Commodore Elliott was subsequently informed,) on the Editor of the New York Courier and Enquirer, and caused the following explanation to be inserted in the same:

Copied from the New York American.

“SIR:—I hasten to correct a statement which appears in the Courier and Enquirer of this morning, which does injustice to Com. Elliott. I bore the propositions from Gen. Towson to Com. Elliott, which, at the request of the Commodore, were reduced to writing; upon a very short consultation with a friend, they were returned by the Commodore, who declined receiving them, but expressed his willingness to consider the note I had delivered as a challenge; a communication to which effect he made in writing. Having no authority from Gen. Towson to proceed further in the matter, in case the propositions were declined, an answer was given to the Commodore to that effect. Gen. Towson has desired that the statement should be made, and requests its immediate publication, as an act of justice to Com. Elliott.

“Very respectfully,

“Your obedient servant,

“P. MACAULY.

“Friday Morning, Aug. 18.”

“The following are the propositions referred to, in the above letter.

“‘Gen. Towson authorizes me to propose, that Com. Elliott should select an officer, or other friend, who with myself shall decide, under existing circumstances, which party shall challenge; and further, should he (Gen. Towson,) be the challenged party, he agrees to wave any advantage arising from that position.’”

This proposition was delivered, unopened by Commodore Elliott, to Colonel Canonge, who directed the Commodore to reply to it by an unconditional acceptance of it, as a challenge, as shown by the correspondence above.

APPENDIX.

HEAD QUARTERS, LEWISTOWN, SEPT. 25, 1812.

Sir,—I have this moment received your letter of yesterday, stating Lieut. Elliott has proposed to make an attempt to cut out one of the vessels at Erie, and has requested your assistance by men, &c., for the enterprize.

You will please to furnish Lieut. Elliott immediately with men, arms, ammunition, boats and implements of every kind to the uttermost of his wishes, and the means you can possibly command to render the enterprize successful.

I am, sir,

S. VAN RENSSELAER.

Major Genl. Hall, Commanding Black Rock.

HEAD QUARTERS, LEWISTOWN, SEPT. 25, 1812.

Sir,—I enclose you a copy of a letter I have this day sent to Major-General Hall, with my best wishes that success may crown your enterprize.

I am, sir, with great respect,

Your most obedient servant,

Signed,

S. VAN RENSSELAER, *Major-General.*

Lieut. Elliott, of the U. S. Navy, Buffalo.

KINDERHOOK, JULY 15, 1835.

Dear Sir,—I think it was on the night of the 10th inst., that Col. Schuyler, then commanding the brigade, and Cols. Mead and Stranahan's regiment of the Militia were informed in my presence by the Militia patrols, that the British were crossing the Niagara, both above and below us, in great numbers. The colonel then requested me to take a few with me, and select a station of the river where I could see all that passed on it. I posted myself on the bank a little to the north of Genl. Porter's house, and immediately sent a man to camp to inform the colonel that there was no movement on the river, in that direction, as far as the eye could see, it being a light night. I continued to despatch a man with the like information every half hour until about 10 o'clock, when I heard the movement of the troops on the road, challenged, and was answered by the adjutant of the 13th infantry, whose voice I well knew, saying "the enemy has landed above and below us in great force, and we are on the retreat." Having left my horse with Genl. Porter's servant the previous day, I hastened there and gave the alarm to you and the general in the very words I had received it from Adjutant Eldridge, and while in conversation with yourself and Gen'l

Porter, NEITHER OF YOU BELIEVING THE REPORT TO BE TRUE, a detachment of my regiment, Capts. Spraul and Martin's Company passing, I was requested to join them, which I did. * * * *

Signed,

M. MYERS,

Late Captain 13th U. S. Infantry.

OCTOBER 8TH.

Sir,—Mr. Prestman will bring you the aid we can give; he is a gallant young man, and I request that he may be allowed to accompany you.

The God who protects the brave, guard you and give you success!

Signed,

ALEXANDER SMYTH.

Lieut. Elliott.

NEW PORT, R. I., AUGUST 27, 1834.

Sir,—On the morning previous to the expedition, Capt. Elliott called at Head Quarters, and stated to the general that a detachment of sailors had arrived at Buffalo on the last evening, and that he thought he could capture the two British vessels, then lying under Fort Erie, if the general would grant him the aid of a small detachment of soldiers, to which the general acceded, and directed me to detail the number of soldiers required. Capt. Elliott *particularly requested* that *no officer* of the army might be detailed to accompany the soldiers, who would, in virtue of his rank, COMMAND ANY NAVAL OFFICER who might have charge of either of the boats. This request was also acceded to, and in obedience to orders, I selected from the infantry thirty or forty men, (I forget the exact number,) AND PLACED THEM UNDER THE COMMAND OF ENSIGN PRESTMAN, of the 5th Regiment of Infantry, who it was intended by me should be the only commissioned officer of the army sent with the troops. But on going to the camp of the artillery, under the command of Lieut. Col. Scott, to select a few men more, I then met Captains Towson and Barker, of that corps, who, on hearing the object of my visit, expressed a great desire to go with the expedition, and on my stating to them that *their rank necessarily precluded them*, they, with their characteristic solicitude to engage in any perilous adventure, volunteered *to go in any capacity whatever*. Under these circumstances, I consented to take one of them, and decided which of the two should go, by hazard, and it fell to the lot of Towson to go. * * * *

One of the vessels grounded close on our side and was secured, the other grounded on the side of Squaw Island, next to the enemy. Capt. Elliott caused the detachment and all the prisoners to be landed, and on the following night the vessel which had grounded on Squaw Island, was set on fire by Capt. Chambers, of the 5th Infantry, and destroyed. * * * *

Respectfully,

Your obedient servant,

JAMES BANKHEAD.

The following letters were written in reply to letters addressed to the authors by Capt. Elliott:—

“NEW CASTLE, JUNE 27, 1834.

“*Dear Sir*,—I have received your letter under date of the 19th of the present month, and regret to learn that you have been assailed by the republication of certain offensive charges. The several high commands, and important duties repeatedly assigned to you, are full evidence that the government and country place every confidence in your patriotism, talents and valor; and if I may take the liberty of offering a suggestion, it would be that it best comports with your dignity and self-respect to rest your cause here. You particularly call my attention to the capture of two English vessels under the guns of Fort Erie in 1812, and say, ‘*as you were acting under my immediate command at the time, will you be kind enough to state to me, as soon as possible, the matters and things relative to that affair?*’

“The length of time that has elapsed, and the entire change which has taken place in my habits and associations, render such reminiscences difficult. I recollect that the attack was made at night, by two boats, in one of which I was with you. The British vessels referred to were taken, one of them brought over to the American shore, and the other, grounding on an island in the river, was destroyed. It appears to me that the facts belonging to the affair speak for themselves. The planning and conducting of the enterprise unquestionably pertained to you, and by every rule of military service, the credit of it is your due.

“Most respectfully, your ob’t serv’t,

“S. W. PRESTMAN.”

“PHILADELPHIA, JUNE 27, 1834.

“CAPT. J. D. ELLIOTT, U. S. N.

“*Dear Sir*,—I received your letter of the 19th inst. several days since, but have been too much indisposed to reply to it. In allusion to ‘*language used by the late Commodore Perry, in 1818, relative to your conduct in the capture of the British brigs Detroit and Caldonia, from under the guns of Fort Erie in 1812,*’ you ask for my impressions of that affair. I never heard that any one but yourself suggested or directed the expedition. It was undoubtedly executed with skill and bravery, or it could not have succeeded. As I was acting under your immediate command, and taking the helm from your cockswain, and laying your boat alongside the *Detroit*, boarding her side by side with you, and during the fight and subsequent cannonade with the British forts, I was constantly near you, I am authorized to, and cheerfully testify, sir, to your bravery on the occasion.

“If we had been defeated, the odium would have attached to you alone. We were successful, and you received all the credit, and I regret that any political occurrence of the present day should tend to disparage your exertions in the late war.

“With much respect and esteem,

“I remain, sir, your ob’t serv’t,

“I. ROACH,

“Late Major U. S. Artillery.”







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